L.A.P.D. leaves 'No Stone' unturned

Out of chaos comes avant-garde theater

NO STONE FOR STUDS SCHWARTZ, a performance by Jim Beame and the Los Angeles Poverty Department (Theater of the Homeless), directed by John Malpede in collaboration with Bill Kerr; lights by Jason Berliner; presented by Pipeline at the Boyd Street Theater, 301 Boyd St., downtown Los Angeles. 8 p.m. Fri/Sat through Feb. 7. Tickets: $8.50. Information: 629-2205.

Studs ............. William Aaron "Jim" Beame
Thief .................. Julius Jenkins Jr.
Addison ............. Kevin Williams
Studs II .......... John Malpede
Tiger Flowers ....... Frank "Bad Boy" Christian
Banducci ........... Carl Bunker
Deborah Kerr ............ Elia Arce
Furtandi ............... Bartholomew Bridges
Joe Skinner ............ Brian Young
John ..................... Marlon Peyton
Zelda ................. Pat Perkius
Killer ............... Apollo Sarros

By Richard Stayton
Herald theater critic

William Aaron "Jim" Beame, center, is a skid-row murder victim in "No Stone for Studs Schwartz," the Los Angeles Poverty Department's latest production.
pipeline production's artistic director Scott Kelman argues that the Los Angeles Poverty Department is "the only true theater ensemble in town." Kelman has a legitimate argument. The L.A.P.D. is now presenting its second play in less than a year at downtown's Boyd Street Theater, but this free-floating orthographic master of a company has been working together even longer. What's most intriguing about their current effort, "No Stone for Studs Schwartz," is how such barely controlled chaos survives at all — either on the Boyd stage or on the streets — yet alone as a committed company of performers.

The L.A.P.D. is composed of actual "street people": poor folks who live on our city's sidewalks or in our downtown flophouses, wrecked cars, abandoned refrigerator boxes — or wherever else they might find temporary, inexpensive (preferably free) shelter. Founded in 1985 by New York performance artist John Malpede, the L.A.P.D. has gradually become a very loose "ensemble." "No Stone for Studs Schwartz" was collectively developed much in the manner that the avant-garde ensemble Aumou Mines's plays are developed material. One member of the company — in this case William Aaron "Jim" Beame — conceives the story to be told, and then the remainder of the company contributes toward that personal vision. All contributions are welcome, but can be discarded or accepted by the piece's originator.

This time out, their contemporary experimental style resulted in a dreamlike tale of a homeless man who's shot and killed on an L.A. street. Just as in Billy Wilder's "Sunset Boulevard," the corpse begins talking about his murder. Then Studs rises and we're back in time with this fugitive outsider, fixing prizefights, fleecing the mob, hiding out on Caribbean islands while hoping to reach Brazil, then somehow fighting Arabs in Israel's six-day war, and even more mysteriously ending up at our own Union Station for the ritual killing.

Is it Beame's life story? If so, then why does he play a character named Studs Schwartz? Is Beame's alter ego? Does it matter?

A valuable program note helps us venture into this alien terrain. "No Stone for Studs Schwartz" may at times appear ambiguous, elements of reality and fantasy indistinguishable. Relax...you only have to deal with it for little over an hour. They have to live with it every day.

L.A.P.D.'s first public presentation, "South of the Clouds," was primarily the expected series of...autobiographical solo performances. Just getting up on a stage and confessing life experiences seemed fulfilling for everyone. Doing so gave the homeless self-respect and dignity, while also providing an audience with insights into the mysteries of that lifestyle. While watching "South of the Clouds," one realized that there are enormous human resources being wasted by our society and that none of the fashionable cliches about the homeless truly represent the reality.

But very little in "South of the Clouds" prepared us for the epic maelstrom of "No Stone for Studs Schwartz." In a weird artistic jump, L.A.P.D. has gone from realistic theater of "South of the Clouds" to post-modernism. There is only one theater working in America producing work similar to "No Stone for Studs Schwartz." New York's ruthlessly avant-garde Wooster Group. In the Wooster's "L.S.D.," "controlled chaos is manufactured. In the L.A.P.D.'s "No Stone," controlled chaos is a given. So are multiple identities, simultaneous time, synchronicity, and all the other subjects being explored by the Wooster Group.

It's now obvious that Malpede and company are after something that's more ambitious than socially relevant therapeutic theater. There is nothing safely liberal or politically "correct" here. For sheer dramatic intensity, ferocity and danger, no other current play on a local stage can compare to L.A.P.D.'s. The black South Africans who performed "Asinamali!" at the Taper last year somewhat resembled the raw defiance of L.A.P.D., in part because those "actors" were also untrained amateurs drawn by such necessity to the theater. If Malpede can keep his crew together, then maybe L.A.P.D. will eventually add craftsmanship to their anarchic energies.

But that's a big "if" and a huge "maybe." Much of the excitement of "No Stone for Studs Schwartz" depends on the player's turbulent, agitated lifestyles. As these 13 or so players merge text with improvisation, fictional character with personal mood, scripted plot with impulsive gesture, an audience is acutely alert to the creative and the life processes.

The streets are this group's theater. Survival is their rehearsal for "No Stone." It's the city's chaos that creates the company's dangerously ignited state of mind. Onstage, a fire might break out at any moment. One member shoots an epitaph at another, and there's an edge to the curse that transcends acting, that emerges from some personal vendetta. Co-director Malpede is perpetually present, "acting" as Beame's "double," simultaneously performing and directing. His eyes never rest, always darting among the hunters, wary for the next unscripted eruption. He comments, prompts, engages, warns...goes silent...always reacting to the words made by his players.

Meanwhile, the entire L.A.P.D. company remains visible next to the stage, laughing at the missed lines or the lines made by those "in character."